

DISCUSSION

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Rewriting the canon as a form of dialoguing with the classics

Encouraging foreign language students to read critically and to dialogue with the text, as suggested in Skopinskaja's article, is an approach that can be adopted not only in language but also literature classes at both secondary and tertiary levels. Literature in particular gives an opportunity for two types of reading mentioned by the author, *ef-ferent* and *aesthetic*. However, contemporary reader's task becomes more complicated when it comes to reading foreign classics, as relating them to the previous knowledge and experience (as emphasised by Skopinskaja) becomes more difficult since it involves overcoming both cultural and historical context barriers. Still, the good reasons for taking this effort were explained in the article. How to motivate the student of English literature to engage ("establish a personal and aesthetic interaction between a reader and a text") with the 17th century poem? The solution seems to be in creating convincing conditions enabling the students' dialogic interaction. The task described below was developed for college students and was inspired by the dramatic quality of Donne's poetic text. This discussion focuses only on the last stanza of the poem. The whole poem is provided at the end of the paper.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
'Tis true; then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

(from *The Flea* by John Donne)

After a short introduction to the literary conventions of the epoch and analysing selected literary devices such as conceits and syllogisms, the students were invited to

work on their individual interpretations by rewriting the poem as a piece of drama, which meant adding stage directions, describing the setting, naming the characters and ascribing particular lines to them. This approach was taken since I believe, similarly to Skopinskaja, that the dialogue helps to negotiate meaning in search of individual interpretation. Indeed, the dialogue was to take place on two levels: between the students and the original text as well as between the characters in the poem.

The students' approaches are illustrated below with the samples of the concluding lines written by: (1) Ewa Bzowska & Barbara Homa, (2) Ilona Matysiak, (3) Mateusz Kowalczyk.

Different interpretations were revealed by the way they selected most relevant lines, or which thoughts and feelings implicit in the poem were made explicit in the dialogue. Most students could not resist adding new ideas at least in stage directions.

(1) M: Well... Honey... It's ok. You killed it, that's fine by me, really. It's just another thing that should force you to change your mind. You killed the flea, didn't you?

W: Yes I did.

M: And so what? Has anything harmful happened to you?

W: No... I guess not.

M: Exactly sweetheart! You see, yielding to me will be just as easy and painless.

And so the couple is making love. Afterwards, the woman kills the man.

In some cases names were given to characters and the original ideas were rearranged.

(2) Man: Richard (Dick); Woman: Prudence

She takes off the sword from the wall and points at the flea with furious hatred in her eyes.

Dick: O stay, three lives in one flea spare,

Where we almost, yea, more than married are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.

He grabs the sword from Prudence's hand and they start struggle. Accidentally they both die. The flea has survived and lives on, carrying the drop of the mingled blood, being the only witness, part and sign of their eternal love.

The woman, who is the addressee of the man's monologue in the poem, is given full voice in the dialogue, while the original lines stay unchanged understood as the male speaker's part.

(3) Woman:

O, my dear, thy heart has lost its ways,

I must alone conclude our fates;

Get away from me thy hands,

I know where my conscience lies!

Man (*with resignation and pain in his voice*):

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since

Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence? ...

Both the choice of language, which was left to the students, and the type of additions they made seemed to reflect the extent to which they could identify with the ideas and feelings in the original text. They either felt comfortable with imitating the poet's

style (3), at the same time distancing themselves from the arguments and emotions involved, or found it more natural to use modern English (1), which may result from their closer identification with the character's conflict.

Hopefully, the activity described above would help to advocate the idea of dialogic interaction with the text and to illustrate the points made in the article about the mechanisms involved in critical reading.

The Flea by John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
 How little that which thou deniest me is;
 It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
 And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
 Thou know'st that this cannot be said
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
 And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
 And this, alas! is more than we would do.

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
 Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
 This flea is you and I, and this
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.
 Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
 And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
 Though use make you apt to kill me,
 Let not to that self-murder added be,
 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
 Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,
 Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
 Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
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